

The New York Times

Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

OCTOBER 24, 2011, 4:13 PM

Childbirth as Performance Art

By JENNY ANDERSON

Here are a few things you can go see at Brooklyn art galleries this week: urban tapestries, black-and-white photography, or if you time it right, Marni Kotak giving birth at the Microscope Gallery in Brooklyn.

Planning could be hard. Ms. Kotak, a performance artist who focuses on everyday events, will be “performing” the birth of her first child whenever he or she chooses to come (in the next few weeks, they hope). But her goal is to deliver in the home-birth center that she and her husband have created inside the small Brooklyn gallery. Expect to see her showering through a plastic curtain, laboring in an inflatable pool or on the double bed where Baby X was conceived, and breastfeeding once the bundle arrives.

The exhibition, “The Birth of Baby X,” raises more than a few interesting questions. Should birth be an exhibition? Who will go to see it? Will anyone take their kids?

Ms. Kotak, who clearly favors a natural, as well as invitational birth, says she has gotten to know visitors passing through the gallery. Those who want to be contacted leave their information at the door. Due to space constraints, only about 15 people (husband, doula, midwife included) will attend the big event. “I’m developing an authentic relationship with these people,” she told the Associated Press.

Her work seems to fall into the category of feminist performance art, meant to confront taboos, challenge social norms and deconstruct gender roles. Carolee Schneeman, quoted in the article as supporting Ms. Kotak’s work, famously pulled a scroll out of her vagina.

But to me, Ms. Kotak’s exhibition underscores less about feminism and more about the move away from hospitals and the multiple medical interventions that come with it (Caesarean sections, epidurals, oxygen), and toward delivery by more natural and non-medical means.

Ricki Lake captured some of these risks in the “The Business of Being Born.” You all have had your own very spirited discussion about the risks of home births and the pitfalls of hospitals. And you had very strong feelings about the very-public nature of live tweeting a birth.

What about childbirth as performance art? Is this an exhibition you would like to see? Is childbirth about outcomes (getting the baby out?) or the process (having the baby, maybe inviting the neighborhood). And what of all this planning? (Share these stories — I love these stories! I planned to have a natural childbirth with my first kid and broke down after 24 hours. I planned to get painkillers with my second but she came too quickly and I got my natural birth).

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